

Open:
Tuesday - Friday
10 - 4:30
Saturday: 10 - 12

Closed:
Sunday and Monday

Vol. 3 No. 4

The LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Bulletin

APRIL - MAY 1969



Perusing through the old papers of the *Scranton Republican* we came across this item which seems rather timely today.

Saturday Morning, May 12th, 1894

Young Lady Gymnasts They entertain pleasingly at Y.M.C.A. Hall

"Y.M.C.A. hall was thronged to the doors last evening on the occasion of the first public exhibition given by the gymnasium classes of the Young Women's Christian Association. Heretofore the masculine relatives and friends have been strictly excluded from these annual affairs and great has been the curiosity and wonder as to what transpired within the sacred fold.

"Sensibly enough, Miss Lois Shardlow, the present physical instructor, was of the opinion that there was nothing immodest in the plain dark gymnasium costumes and in the graceful evolutions which aided in developing rounded figures, strengthening feeble muscles, and in giving a beauty of carriage so woefully absent in the walk of the average girl. Hence it was that last evening the audience contained a large proportion of black coated and white craveted friends of the performers, who watched every movement with a degree of interest charming to witness.

"The marches had nothing in them characteristic of the Amazonian, but surely never were pretty girls more loudly and enthusiastically applauded for intricate evolutions on the stage, than were the fair daughters of Scranton on this occasion.

"The first number given was a military and fancy march by the Ladies class. It was done without an error and the effectiveness pretty in the extreme. The young women wore the divided skirt and blouse waist now considered most desirable in the greatest institution of the world, white collars and floating ties and white ribbons in the hair were the only adornment. The club swinging by the ladies was the most elaborate in detail ever given here. Nothing more graceful can be imagined.

"The fencing exhibit was one of the prettiest features of the evening...

"The hoop drill given by the Misses' class was particularly pleasing and the 'Going out to tea' a doll's drill by the little girls all sweetly arrayed in white, brought down the house."

IN MEMORIUM

Elizabeth Edwards Simpson

Mrs. John R. Simpson, who was elected to the Board of Trustees of the Lackawanna County Historical Society in 1962, died January 21, 1969 in Jefferson Medical Center in Philadelphia. As trustee she assumed the chairmanship of the committee to arrange for the exhibit of the large and rare collection of costumes owned by the Society. Many of these were worn by prominent local residents; others, numbering in the hundreds, were given by the Museum of the City of New York.

Betty Simpson was a warm and friendly person fairly bursting with imaginative and unusual ideas. Unfortunately her plans for displaying the costumes were cut short by her untimely death, but will be carried out by the trustees in the future.

Her gracious tactful manner and support will be very much missed by the Board who express to her daughter and son their sincere sympathy.

THE AMERICAN STREETCAR

In the modest library of the Catlin House is a growing collection of books on transportation, primarily of the modes which were favorites in bygone days.

One of these is *Trolley Car Treasury* by Frank Rowsome, Jr., with Stephen D. Maguire, Technical Editor, published by Bonanza Books. Over 300 delightful photographs portray the history of the streetcar from its earliest days as a horsedrawn carriage to its modern day counterpart of high-speed, streamlined cars. But the words of Frank Rowsome, Jr. bring back to life the clanging, hissing noises, the smells, and the rugged character of each succeeding generation of the American streetcar. One can't help but be impressed by Mr. Rowsome's own love for the trolley, and the nostalgia felt by the author is quickly passed on to the reader.

"No one, not knowing, would be likely to guess from the few docile vehicles running today the vigor and importance that streetcars have had in the recent past. They have gone from among us with dismaying speed, like our youth, and the memory of their past vitality grows dimmer each year. Today trolleys run in only a handful of cities, and they are mostly a uniform, sterile sort, lacking the gritty and eccentric demeanor of their predecessors."

In 1902, American trolleys carried 5.8 billion riders. Just six years later, the American public had adopted Fontaine Fox's "Toonerville Trolley" cartoons (two are reproduced in the book) as a national favorite. The decrepit Toonerville Trolley reflected the public's warm and friendly feeling toward its trolleys.

In the days of the horsecars, the largest single investment was in animals. Troy, New York had 425 horses to pull 46 cars while Boston had 3600 horses for its 700 cars. Some companies had color preferences, and the New York City Third Avenue Line used gray horses on the theory that they would mind the hot weather the least.

Many of the devices so familiar to bus riders today were pioneered in the days of the horsecar: straps for standees, signaling bells for passengers, zoned fare systems, and marked stopping places.

Many new problems were created as a result

of the horsecar, not the least of which was — snow removal!

"Before horsecars, little effort had been made to remove snow from the streets. It was just packed down by traffic and ignored, awaiting a warm spell that would supply automatic removal. This was no longer satisfactory, because packed snow derailed the cars. When scrapers were first used and rock salt sprinkled along the track to encourage melting, sharp controversies broke out. Bare rails made such difficulties for sleighs and pungs that some cities flatly prohibited snow removal, at least as long as the sleighing was good. Until enough political pressure could be mobilized to change these ordinances, many lines kept sleighs in the carbarns with which to maintain limited service. The use of rock salt stirred up hypochondriacs among the public. They felt to a man that this was a dangerous practice, injurious to the public health. It was contended that the salt made the weather along the street colder and rawer than it would otherwise have been and turned the street into a kind of gigantic ice-cream freezer. Most streetcar men said nothing, tried to keep the cars running, and prayed for spring."

The pioneering horsecars were to be replaced by another breed of streetcars, soon to be king of American transportation.

"However halting and uncertain electric cars were at birth, there has rarely been a lustier child. In a handful of years horsecars were routed, cable cars were shoved onto a steep downslope, and the triumphant trolleys were carrying six times as many passengers as all the steam railroads in the country. In Brooklyn, so many car lines wound through the streets that the local baseball team was named the Trolley Dodgers, soon shortened to Dodgers."

The book contains a 1905 photograph of a trolley under construction which is amazingly similar to scenes Lackawanna Historical Society members have observed in the workshops of the Magee Museum of Transportation, under Edward Blossom's sensitive direction, in Bloomsburg, Pa. There trolley enthusiasts can ride on and see many of the streetcars described by Mr. Rowsome.

"By far the most ambitious task that trolley enthusiasts have tackled has been the establishment of trolley museums — havens where old cars would be safe from the cutting torch and where they could be lovingly restored to their original condition and maybe even run a little on a stretch of private track.

"Everything about restoring a trolley is laborious and outsize, though true fans know it's worth it. Refinishing may take hundreds of hours of work. Repairing and renewing intricate old control and brake systems takes patience and a special feeling for bygone mechanisms. Laying tracks and switches, erecting poles, and stringing overhead is physically a tough job.

"But if at one of these museums you climb aboard some familiar old trolley, you'll be astonished to find yourself sliding back three or four decades in time. You'll sniff that long-forgotten but familiar odor compounded of paint, hot motors, and track sand. You'll feel the same ponderous lurch as the rails steer the old car on its course. You'll hear the rattle of the windows, the detuned clonk of the gong, the noisy aspirations of the air brake, and the busy nok-nok-nok of the compressor. It will take you eerily back to the days when we were all younger and the trolley was the favorite American car."

* * *

PROGRAM NOTES — MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF APRIL MEETING

Tuesday, April 22. "The Knox Coal Disaster." Attorney George A. Spohrer, of Wilkes-Barre will talk on the disaster of which he has become something of authority. Many residents will remember that ten years ago last January the Susquehanna River broke through the river bottom into the mines, drowning 12 workers and flooding untold acres of "black diamonds" in Luzerne County. The flooding of the Port Griffiths mine operation marked the beginning of the end of coal mining in the valley. 8:15 p.m.

Wednesday, May 21. Annual Dinner meeting. The Honorable T. Linus Hoban, retired judge of Lackawanna County, will talk on "My Life in the Lackawanna County Courts." Members are reminded to call the society to make dinner reservations. 6:30 p.m.

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NEW MEMBERS

Mr. Hyman Markowitz
Mrs. Joseph E. Moylan
Mrs. Michael P. Morrow
Mr. Joseph Philbin
Mr. Robert W. Munley
Mrs. Irene Grampp Cooper

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